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ABSTRACT

College freshmen transitioning from parental guidance to autonomous living are particularly at risk for engaging in heavy alcohol use. With reduced parental control, increased independence and peer influence, and a new physical and social environment, they are particularly vulnerable to risky drinking and associated consequences. The purpose of this study was to assess how drinking behaviors and related consequences of incoming freshmen correlated with and without their parents' knowledge of their drinking. Drinking behaviors and associated negative consequences were assessed with freshman attending a mid-western university. Students reported having a mean of 5.8 drinks when they party. Age of first drink with and without parents' knowledge was 14 years old. The younger the student drank without their parents' knowledge, the more they drank as freshmen. The results suggest that parental knowledge of early alcohol use may be a protective factor against heavier drinking and negative consequences when students transition to college. (JDM)

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Parental Lack of Knowledge of First Alcohol Use and Risky Behaviors of Incoming College Freshmen

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Abstract

College freshmen transitioning from parental guidance to autonomous living are particularly at-risk for engaging in heavy alcohol use. With reduced parental control, increased independence and peer influence, and a new physical and social environment, college freshmen are particularly vulnerable to risky drinking and associated consequences.

The purpose of this study was to assess the drinking behaviors and related consequences of incoming freshmen correlated with and without their parents' knowledge of their drinking. Drinking behaviors and associated negative consequences were assessed with incoming freshmen attending new student orientation at a mid-western university.

Students reported having a mean of 5.8 (1999) to 5.7 (2000) drinks when they party. Age of first drink with parents' knowledge *and* without parents' knowledge was 14 years old. Interestingly, the younger the student drank without their parents' knowledge, the more they were drinking as incoming college freshmen and had experienced more negative consequences due to their drinking. These results suggest that parental knowledge of early alcohol use may be a protective factor against heavier drinking and negative consequences when the student is transitioning to college.

Introduction

Heavy alcohol use and related consequences continue to be a major problem for college students and administration. Studies have reported up to 90% of college students use alcohol. In national surveys from 1993 to 1999, a steady trend of 40% to 45% of college students reported drinking five or more drinks in a row over the last two weeks. Consequently, these heavy drinkers are

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more likely to drive after drinking, get injured, have unprotected sex, get in trouble with police, and get behind in class.

Adolescents transitioning from home to college are particularly at-risk for heavy alcohol use due to reduced parental guidance, increased personal autonomy, and new social factors, such as new friends and living arrangements. Yet, studies have found that many students have engaged in heavy alcohol use prior to attending college.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to assess the drinking behaviors and related consequences of incoming freshmen correlated with and without parents' knowledge of their drinking. We wanted to determine whether parents' knowledge (or lack of knowledge) of their student's drinking was associated with particular drinking levels and positive or negative outcomes.

Drinking behaviors (e.g., number of drinks, hours partying) and associated negative consequences (e.g., trouble with police, passed out, memory loss) were assessed. Additionally, age of first drink and age of parents' knowledge of first drink were also assessed.

Participants

The data for this study were collected at a large mid-western university. Participants included incoming first-year students attending the 1999 and 2000 summer orientation and enrollment session for the upcoming fall semester. Data were collected from June through the end of July.

The nonrandom sample size was 2526 in Summer 1999 and 3413 in Summer 2000. Students voluntarily and anonymously participated in completing the survey and encompassed about 70% (1999) to 80% (2000) of all incoming freshmen students. The sample included 58% females and 42% males in 1999 and 55% females and 45% males in 2000, with a median age of 18 years old for both summers.

Measurement

Data for this study were derived from a self-report alcohol survey. The two-page survey assessed:

— alcohol use (e.g., number of drinks consumed at a party)

— perceptions of friends' alcohol use (e.g., number of drinks they believed friends had when they partied)

— perceptions of the university's students' alcohol use (e.g., number of drinks they believed the average student attending the university had when they partied)

— drinking -related behaviors (e.g., number of hours that they partied, drank with friends, used a designated driver)

— consequences resulting from alcohol use (e.g., incurred injuries, failed a test, interfered with relationships, got in trouble with police)

The original self-report survey was developed by the University of Arizona with input from schools participating in the social norms media project grant. The original survey was administered to existing KU students. The data presented here were collected from a modified, abbreviated version of the original survey administered to incoming first-year freshmen during new student summer orientation in 1999 and 2000.

The incoming freshmen voluntarily and anonymously completed surveys administered by orientation assistants (university students). The two-page survey took about 10 minutes to complete. Orientation assistants collected completed surveys and returned them to the university's Social Norms Media Project. The surveys were analyzed by the university's Office for Institutional Research and Planning.

Results

Students' Characteristics and Drinking Behaviors, 1999 and 2000

	1999	2000
Overall sample (n)	2526	3413
Gender (%)		
males	42	45
females	58	55
Never had a drink (%)	12	12
Mean age first drink (years)		
with parents knowledge	14.4	14.7
w/o parents knowledge	14.8	14.8
Mean number of drinks as incoming freshmen	5.8	5.7

Number of Drinks Correlated with Age of First Drink With and Without Parents' Knowledge

	1999	2000
Number of drinks (> with younger ages of first drink)		
with parents' knowledge	.001	.001
w/o parents' knowledge	-.282*	-.299*
*Pearson correlations, p<.0001		

Age of First Drink Without Parents Knowledge Correlated with Negative Consequences and Behaviors

	1999	2000
driven within an hour of drinking	-.25*	-.20*
had sexual intercourse after drinking	-.25*	-.18*
had a hangover	-.24*	-.28*
gotten sick	-.23*	-.20*
passed out	-.23*	--
had memory loss	-.23*	-.20*
received a low grade or failed a course	-.14*	-.14*
*Pearson correlations, p<.0001		

Discussion

The results indicated the age of first drink with *or without* parents' knowledge was the same - 14 years old. Interestingly, the younger the student drank without the parents' knowledge increased the likelihood of their drinking more as incoming college freshmen. Additionally, the younger the student drank without parental knowledge, the more likely they had incurred negative consequences due to their drinking (e.g., gotten sick, been in trouble with police, used other drugs). Furthermore, these results indicate that students' drinking behaviors may be well-established prior to transitioning to the college setting.

These results also suggest parental knowledge of early alcohol use may be a protective factor against heavier drinking and associated negative consequences when the student is transitioning to the college level.

There are several implications this study has on university alcohol prevention activities. First, college administration should encourage parents to have open communication about alcohol use and expectations of their students' use before and after the students' transition to the college campus. Second, understanding that students are coming to campus with drinking experience, summer orientation programs could be used to convey messages of moderate and responsible use of alcohol for the new college students. Finally, implementing campus-wide interventions that broadcasts the normative drinking behaviors of the university's students may be helpful in encouraging those students who choose to drink to do so at safe levels in line with their peers.